

CANADA'S LIFESTYLE MAGAZINE FOR  
PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES  
SUMMER 1994  
ISSUE 19  
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# abilities

## LANDING A JOB

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### WHEN YOU'RE A WOMAN WITH A DISABILITY

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AIMING FOR INCLUSION  
IN EDUCATION

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FINDING SEXUAL IDENTITY

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HON. LLOYD AXWORTHY

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NATIONAL ACCESS  
AWARENESS WEEK  
May 30 to June 5

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PLUS:  
The Council of Canadians with Disabilities  
The Ontario March of Dimes  
The Canadian Association of Independent Living Centres  
Human Resources Development Canada

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WEVE  
MOVED!

Canadian Abilities Foundation  
Access Place Canada, College Park  
444 Yonge Street, Toronto, Ont. M5B 2H4  
Tel: (416) 977-5185 Fax: (416) 977-5098

# *She Wants To WORK HARD FOR THE MONEY!*

*Women with disabilities speak out on the issue of employment*

The *Employment Equity Act* was developed in an effort to level the playing field for individuals who are at certain disadvantages for finding and retaining employment.

Women who have disabilities are widely considered doubly disadvantaged. For this group, legislation alone may not be enough. The need for awareness, support and information-sharing is critical if these individuals are to become viewed, across the board, as equal, participating members of the work force.

In an effort to learn more about these issues, we posed questions to a variety of employed women across Canada who have disabilities. The following perspectives reflect their experiences, concerns and suggestions for women with disabilities in the work force.

## **What is the best advice you can give for being proactive about finding employment?**

**NORMA LORINCZ:** Know what skills and abilities you have and what you can bring to an organization. Write them down. Get an objective opinion from someone who knows you. All too often, we sell ourselves short on our abilities. Read them every day until you believe they are a part of you. If there are any gaps between your abilities and the job you are seeking, do whatever it takes to bridge that gap.

**IRENE FEIKA:** Let friends and professional colleagues know you are seeking employment. Develop an

organized method for keeping track of who you apply to and what the results were. Example: Note if you got an interview, letter, etc. Know something about the organization to which you are applying.

**FRANCINE ARSENAULT:** Sometimes volunteer work in your chosen field will lead to meaningful employment. Send updated résumés to places you'd really like to work even if they haven't advertised a job opening. If the accompanying letter is very positive, it may trigger the employer to make an opening for such a deserving person.

**SUSAN FORSTER:** Apply for jobs selectively. Apply to those positions for which you feel that you are most qualified. Don't waste your time and energy applying for every conceivable job that comes along.

Learn to network. I can't emphasize that enough. I found out about most of the jobs I was subsequently hired for by networking. Whenever I can, I have since tried to return the support which I received and tell fellow women with disabilities about any job opportunities that I hear about.

**TRACI WALTERS:** Sometimes you might seek and accept a job that isn't exactly what you want and doesn't pay as much as you would like. But if the organization is one that you like, then I would suggest taking the job, getting your foot in the door and working your way up. This way you are able to learn all aspects of the organization and demonstrate your abilities.

**MARIE WHITE:** When an individual is seeking employment, it is important she not think that, by virtue of the training she has had, she is limited to one occupation.

Prior to my disability, I was teaching elementary/junior high school. I never considered any other line of work because I did not think that I could do anything else. After I acquired a disability, however, I discovered that my education and teaching experience had prepared me for a variety of employment opportunities. I began by doing contract work — developing workshops, doing reports, etc. After two years, I ran in our municipal election and now I am a municipal councillor.

A person must recognize and capitalize on her range of abilities and ensure any potential employers are aware of these abilities.

**HELEN WAGLE:** Be persistent. Network with community organizations that help



**FRANCINE ARSENAULT**

*has been involved for many years in the disability rights movement. She is a past president of PUSH Ontario, and a past Canadian Representative and Secretary for the North American and Caribbean region of Disabled People's International. She is currently the chairperson of the Council of Canadians with Disabilities. (Perth, Ontario)*



**BETTY DAVIDSON**

*is the provincial coordinator of National Access Awareness Week in Ontario. For the past four years she has sat on the Special Needs Advisory Committee of George Brown College. She has been a peer counsellor for the Kidney Foundation of Canada for five years, and for the past six years she has been on the Board of Directors for Toronto Citizen Advocacy; currently she is a past president in an advisory role. She recently became a proud grandmother. (Toronto, Ontario)*



**TANIS DOE**

*serves as the resource person to the reference group of people with disabilities for the Canada Labour Force Development Board. She is very involved in the myriad of issues surrounding disability. (Victoria, British Columbia)*



**IRENE FEIKA**

*is the executive information officer of Disabled People's International (DPI). She is also the Canadian representative and secretary to the DPI North American and Caribbean region. She is on the Canada Council for the International Year*

women with disabilities find employment such as YWCAs, DAWN chapters and Independent Living Centres. Find out what organizations in your area post job opportunities and have job information hotlines.

**SHEILA SERUP:** Be positive and upbeat. Believe that there is a job for you, you just have to find it. Search diligently and remember, it takes time to find what you are looking for. Never be down on yourself, and always be patient.

## What do you think makes for an impressive résumé or application?

**SUSAN FORSTER:** A really good résumé is written clearly and concisely. Even if you are really low on cash, try to use good quality paper and access a laser printer, if possible. As a woman with a visual impairment, I think there is nothing worse than trying to read a résumé with extremely faint print.

If you have little or no job experience, then highlight your education and/or volunteer experience. Another alternative if you have limited job experience is to do a skill-based résumé. This approach can work very well, but try to be specific about what you can do, and avoid the use of vague-sounding hyperbole and exaggeration. I used to work in a large government human resources department. We received hundreds of résumés every time a job was advertised, and believe me, an experienced human resources professional can pretty quickly spot it if you are exaggerating your skills or are vague about your abilities.

Two last tips: Never write on an application that you are prepared to do anything! This shows your enthusiasm, but it doesn't tell an employer anything concrete about what you may be capable of doing. Use action verbs whenever you can in your résumé, and include any specific accomplishments which you have achieved.

**TANIS DOE:** An impressive résumé is customized to the job and not "standard issue." If your résumé has things on it which you did or accomplished which match up with the job descriptions or qualifications required, it impresses.

**FRANCINE ARSENAULT:** Your résumé or application doesn't have to be done professionally, but clear, concise information about education, past experience, strengths and weaknesses as well as hobbies and volunteer work is essential.

If all this information is presented in a tidy format with a good covering letter, it will impress any possible employer.

**TRACI WALTERS:** Have a cover letter which is tailored for the position. I can't stand getting résumés from people who have form cover letters for all jobs. Sell yourself and your abilities in two paragraphs of the cover letter. Catch their eye to make them want to read your résumé.

## Have you ever heard/said anything during an interview which prevented the candidate's/your getting the position? Please describe.

**TRACI WALTERS:** Yes, I was once asked how old my children were, and I had to tell them that I had two children, one five years old, and one two months old. When they heard me say a two-month-old baby, I could see everyone tense up. I did get the job, but if I hadn't have, it would have been because of that situation, I'm sure.

**BETTY DAVIDSON:** While I was interviewing a candidate for a job, the individual kept mentioning their disability rather than their ability.

**TANIS DOE:** When applying for a job in an agency, don't openly criticize the way the person or persons working there have been in the past. It is frustrating because of the duality of being both consumer and professional. This only applies to people with disabilities seeking employment in areas where they may have been actively advocating. Don't use the interview to advocate – use it to convince them of your worth. Maybe you can do some social change advocacy once you get the job and have some influence over service delivery, but don't use the interview as your soapbox.

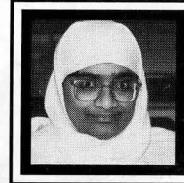
**FRANCINE ARSENAULT:** As an employer, I would hesitate to give a position to someone who hasn't researched what my company does and what she feels her contribution can be to better my company.

**SHEILA SERUP:** During my university years, I had a job interview with the publisher of a small-town newspaper. After a few questions, he zeroed in on my hearing loss. I explained it to him and expressed that it had not affected my previous newspaper jobs. After listening to me, he leaned back in his chair, put his feet on the desk, and said that I could not possibly cover city hall meetings,

*of the Family. She is a past chair of the Council of Canadians with Disabilities (CCD, formerly COPOH) and the first woman elected to this position. She is also a past chair of the Alberta Committee of Citizens with disabilities. She is currently the chairperson of CCD's International Committee. (Edmonton, Alberta)*

## SUSAN FORSTER

*works for Management Board Secretariat for the Province of Ontario. In the past she has been active in the disability rights movement. Her combination of a government and a consumer-based employment background brings a unique view to this article. (Toronto, Ontario)*



## RAFIA HANIFF

*is the supervisor for the Outreach Recruitment Program at the City of Toronto. She is a community activist and speaks out on issues relating to human rights, employment equity, women's issues and advocacy. She is the chair of the Ethno-Racial People with Disabilities Coalition of Ontario (ERDCO), as well as being on the board of the DisAbled Women Network Ontario and the Centre for Independent Living in Toronto. (Toronto, Ontario)*



## NORMA LORINCZ

*is the provincial coordinator for National Access Awareness Week in Alberta. In 1986-87 she worked with the Alberta portion of the Rick Hansen Man In Motion Tour. She is also an active member of the Cerebral Palsy Association in Alberta and the Cerebral Palsy Sports Association. (Edmonton, Alberta)*

**KIM MILLER**

*has, over the past 10 years, gained a reputation as an activist, advocate and spokesperson about issues as far-ranging as "Impaired Thinking About Impaired Driving"; access, equity and accommodation; employment and persons with disabilities; confronting sexual harassment; and coping with chronic pain. She is also "The Voice" for ABILITIES on audio cassette. (Toronto, Ontario)*

**SHEILA SERUP**

*works as a communications officer with the Public Affairs Bureau of the Government of Yukon. As well, she is coordinating the activities of National Access Awareness Week in the territory. (Whitehorse, Yukon)*

**MEENU SIKAND-TAYLOR**

*is the president of the Centre for Independent Living in Toronto (CILT). She is also a member of both the Toronto Transit Advisory Council on accessible transportation and the Ethno-Racial People with Disabilities Coalition of Ontario. (Toronto, Ontario)*

**SPIRIT SYNOTT**

*is an actor, model, writer, musician and artist, and is involved in communications and public relations. (Toronto, Ontario)*

school board meetings, etc., but I could probably do some other things. I hastened to explain to him that at several other papers I had covered all kinds of meetings without any problems. His attitude appeared sceptical. At that point I knew that I was not going to get the job. And I didn't.

**SUSAN FORSTER:** As a woman who is legally blind, I have applied for jobs in the past which required a driver's licence as an essential qualification. On more than one occasion, I didn't get the job because of this requirement. Employers now seem to be more aware that "ability to travel" is more appropriate for most jobs than a driver's licence. Nevertheless, despite the fact that employers have a duty to accommodate a person with a disability under the *Ontario Human Rights Code*, I still sometimes see job ads with a driver's licence requirement listed when this may not be an essential qualification and ability to travel may be all that is really required.

**IRENE FEIKA:** While interviewing someone for a direct-care position with people who had mental handicaps, the candidate asked the following question: "What are we talking about here, vegetables?" Needless to say, it was the shortest interview I ever did (and he didn't get the job!).

### Do you have any quick tips for a candidate during a job interview?

**KIM MILLER:** Perhaps the most important variable that a female job seeker with a disability must consider is to what degree she should disclose the nature, extent and effects of her disability to her potential employer. A woman who has a less visible or "hidden" disability or health condition generally has more choice than a woman whose disability is visible or fairly obvious.

If, for example, you navigate with a guide dog or white cane, communicate through an interpreter or use a mobility aid such as a scooter, wheelchair, walker or leg brace, the interviewer(s) will certainly notice the outward signs of disability. In this situation, the job candidate should be prepared at the first interview to discuss whether or not her disability would have any impact on her ability to perform the job duties.

On the other hand, a woman whose disability is "hidden" or less visible may want to delay disclosing that she has a disability until the second interview.

Women who have medical conditions such as epilepsy, fibromyalgia or hemophilia; mild visual, hearing, functional or mobility impairments, or perhaps a history of emotional or psychiatric difficulties, have much greater leeway in choosing the timing of the disclosure of disability-related information than their counterparts with visible disabilities.

In either situation, the key to successful disability disclosure is to provide the interviewer(s) with relevant and sufficient information as it relates to the position being applied for. There is nothing to be gained by talking about your HIV status when the duties of the job do not involve any risk of transmission of the virus.

The issue is not deciding whether or not you should disclose that you have a disability. Rather, the issue is at what point in the interview process should you discuss the nature and impact of your disability or health condition.

**NORMA LORINCZ:** The job interview can be a nerve-racking experience. To minimize the nerves, there are a few points to remember:

Be clean and neat from head to toe. Dress professionally. Remember: "You never get a second chance to make a first impression."

Talk positively to yourself about yourself before and during the interview. This will help present a confident and self-assured image.

Usually the interviewee has the opportunity to ask questions about the job, company, expectations, etc. Have a set of questions ready to ask the interviewer when the time is appropriate.

Thank the interviewer for the opportunity to have the interview.

**BETTY DAVIDSON:** Appearance is important – make sure your attire is appropriate and personal hygiene and grooming are flawless. Concentrate more on your abilities rather than talking about the fact that you have a disability and therefore should be hired. Be honest in the answers you give. If there are special accommodations that are needed, e.g. voice computer, large-print monitor, TTY, etc., try to find out ways and means of acquiring these devices before going to your interview.

**MEENU SIKAND-TAYLOR:** During the interview, it's very important that you listen to what the employer is asking for. Watch the body language carefully to help you understand the question, and do not hesitate to ask for the question again if you're not sure about the meaning. Keep the dialogue going. Even if you are having trouble understanding, com-

**HELEN WAGLE**

*is a disability rights activist. She is currently the provincial coordinator of the Ontario Network of Independent Living Centres, a provincial umbrella association whose mandate is to promote the Independent Living philosophy in Ontario by maintaining a network of Independent Living Centres. She holds a Bachelor's degree in politics from Queen's University. (Toronto, Ontario)*

**TRACI WALTERS**

*is the national director of the Canadian Association of Independent Living Centres (CAILC). Her responsibilities focus on promoting and fostering the development of Independent Living Resource Centres throughout Canada. She is formerly the executive director of the Niagara Centre for Independent Living (NCIL) and has relocated to Ottawa with her two small children to assume her new position. (Ottawa, Ontario)*

**MARIE WHITE**

*is a town councillor in St. John's, Newfoundland. She is also a representative of persons with disabilities on the Newfoundland and Labrador Labour Force Development Board. (St. John's, Newfoundland)*

municate that message – don't ignore the question. Give and take. Don't always assume you know what he or she wants to hear.

If the employer is lacking in some knowledge about you, you are there to help them out. Work as a team during the interview. But if you think that the employer is crossing the line, and you think that he doesn't need that information, you can draw that line. Trust your intuition.

**SHEILA SERUP:** During a job interview, try to look calm, confident, poised and professional. Try to keep your hands at peace or lightly clasped on your lap. Listen to the questions carefully and answer them clearly. Look directly at the interviewer when speaking. Establish good eye contact, be positive, and believe in yourself.

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**What do you think the value is of on-the-job evaluation? How can someone ensure that she gets this evaluation and that it prepares her for promotion?**

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**MARIE WHITE:** On-the-job evaluation is imperative for a person who is interested in being successful and in "getting ahead." By having one's supervisor delineate your strengths and weaknesses and discuss these with you, it gives you an opportunity to capitalize on your strengths and work on your weaknesses – weaknesses which you might not recognize on your own.

By receiving objective feedback about your work skills through an on-the-job evaluation, you can plan a strategy for success.

**RAFIA HANIFF:** It is extremely important because if a woman with a disability has had major achievements in her workplace, and she knows that she can get the job done and can meet the performance objectives and goals, it is documented. It will be helpful to her if for some reason someone says, "I don't think you are doing your job right," and may want to discriminate against her because of her disability. She can go back to the performance evaluation, to that documentation. In order to ensure that a woman gets this evaluation, she should ask for one, and not in a threatening way.

Women with disabilities face major barriers in getting promotions within an organization. Women in general face the "glass ceiling"; women with disabilities

face the *concrete ceiling*. An evaluation can focus her and be helpful in the promotion process, because a lot of times, we have to prove ourselves on the job.

**TANIS DOE:** Informal evaluations are often better than formal ones – the graded blocks of skills are fragmenting and unfair to most people with disabilities who have limitations in specific areas. An informal evaluation, which takes into consideration the whole person and how they do their job, is better.

**SHEILA SERUP:** An on-the-job evaluation helps to keep your perspective on your career goals and it identifies training needs. Ask your employer for an evaluation if one is not routinely done. At this time, discuss promotion possibilities.

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**When you entered the work force, what were some additional considerations for maintaining your job, e.g. transportation, child care, attendants, hours or other accommodations? What steps can be taken to address these issues?**

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**KIM MILLER:** When I entered the work force as a full-time employee, the greatest consideration for me was that, since I never had held a full-time position, I did not know what my own physical and psychological limitations were. As a person with functional limitations resulting from paralysis of my right arm and hand, mild mobility impairment and emotional difficulties related to coping with chronic pain, I honestly didn't know whether or not I could cope with the demands of the job. How could I even begin to discuss job accommodation with my employer when I didn't even know what my own strengths, needs and limitations were?

The consideration, therefore, on the part of both the employer and the employee who is just entering the work force should be that both parties are willing to assess the work performance and accommodations on an ongoing "trial-and-error" basis.

**MARIE WHITE:** When I went back to work, I had one main concern: my work hours. I cannot begin my workday at 9:00 a.m. Every morning I do a set of exercises to maintain and improve my physical abilities. If I had to get up early enough to do these and be at work by 9:00 a.m., I would be exhausted before my day even began! When self-employ-

ed, I did not encounter this problem, as I worked according to my schedule – starting and finishing my work later than an average workday. As a councillor, I am also not tied to a nine-to-five workday, so it too meets my needs.

**MEENU SIKAND-TAYLOR:** When I entered my first job, transportation and the work hours were the main issues because, working in information services, I knew that I'd have to be available for support, which required after-hours work. That meant I had to have transportation available to accommodate me. Relying on Wheel-Trans was very difficult, and it was critical for me to pass that information to my manager in a very positive way. Some people advised me not to mention these problems at the time of the interview, fearing that I probably would not be hired. But I took a positive stance. I was sure that if I didn't address these issues at the time of the interview, I might be hired but not able to keep that job, because those problems *did* exist.

After talking to my interviewer, we were able to set up a system where I could take a taxi after hours, paid for by the company. I also had a beeper available to me so I could contact someone else if there was a safety concern. And I took the numbers of employees who lived close by, so we could share transportation. As things developed, my relationships with other employees were stronger and I organized myself to set up realistic deadlines and meet them on time, knowing that I didn't have flexible transportation available to me.

**TANIS DOE:** The biggest transition for women would be support services and housing. Social assistance provides you with a subsidy for housing and home care services. Once employed and receiving an income, eligibility for housing and home care changes. Some of the home care can still be provided, but for a charge, and you have to move out of the subsidized housing. A major change of living situation results, and this is a very frustrating disincentive to employment!

**TRACI WALTERS:** Child care! I am a single mother with two small children. In order for me to travel out of town, special considerations must be made for the care of my children. If this was not considered, I would never be able to accept a position. There is definitely a glass ceiling for single moms. I can't understand why people don't see the long-term benefits. Companies will pay for alcohol for entertainment purposes but won't consider a few bucks for night care. The

treasury board, for example, has guidelines that accommodate a "sole-supporting" parent.

**IRENE FEIKA:** As a diabetic, eating on time has always been an issue which is difficult if, for example, a meeting runs overtime. I am also on a great deal of medication for major gastrointestinal dysfunction. The comments ("jokes") about my drugs are not easy to cope with. The fact that my disabilities are hidden ones tends to make people much less accommodating or empathetic.

**HELEN WAGLE:** I have low vision and require various technical aids to do my job. Before I accept any job I always ask to what extent the employer is willing to accommodate my needs. This is normally followed by the employer questioning me as to what I would require to do my job. I am very specific about my needs and the equipment I require. I generally present my employer with a list of what I need and the anticipated costs. From there we come to an agreement on what accommodation I will receive and when I will get it. Remember, the law is on your side. Employers are under an obligation to accommodate their employees with disabilities.

**SHEILA SERUP:** Within the work force as well as in my personal life I need to have a volume control on my telephone. In all work positions, I have been proactive in making sure a volume control is provided. As well, I ask for certain adjustments to be made by the people I work with, such as facing me when speaking to me, and speaking clearly. I think it's very important to be proactive, make suggestions and recommendations on how job accommodations can be made. Employers welcome this, and it makes it easier for them once they understand what is needed. Don't wait for anything to be done. Initiate action and get involved.

**NORMA LORINCIZ:** When I entered the work force and was learning a new task, I needed to know what the final result was to look like and what was done to get there. Then, working with my capabilities, I worked backwards to find a way that I could use to achieve the same results. Sometimes it took more than effort. You need to be patient and willing to find "your way."

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## What are the differences and similarities between women with disabilities and other groups in the workplace (men, men with disabilities, women of various ethnic backgrounds, and single white males) as they face different issues and barriers in the workplace?

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**SUSAN FORSTER:** I think that everyone in the work force nowadays, with or without disabilities, faces stress and anxiety due to the changing nature of our economy and the recession. However, women with disabilities and women from different ethnic, cultural and racial backgrounds face additional barriers. These barriers occur in part due to our minority status in this society. Somehow because we are seen to be different it can be harder for our contributions to be valued in the workplace.

Especially now, during this recession, I have heard many people comment that people with disabilities and other minorities have to be patient and realize that times are hard for everyone. My response to that is that even during the prosperous years of the '60s, right through the '80s, men and women with disabilities and other minorities were often excluded or under-represented in the work force. So we are no strangers to adversity, then or now. The incorrect assumption that our needs as women with disabilities are somehow less valid during a recession and that we should be patient makes us more vulnerable and subject to discrimination in the workplace than our able-bodied peers.

Additionally, people with disabilities who require accommodation on the job are in some ways more vulnerable than other minorities, as accommodation is often viewed as being too expensive to undertake. Hopefully, the proclamation of employment equity legislation in Ontario and growing awareness concerning the rights of persons with disabilities may help to change attitudes and decrease our present under-representation in the work force.

**FRANCINE ARSENAULT:** Gender discrimination is there whether you have a disability or not. With men with disabilities, as well as men who are able-bodied, you just have to, day by day, prove you can do what you agreed to do. Learn not to be picky about being assisted, but never feel you have to do more

or expect less because you have a disability.

**TANIS DOE:** This question in no way addresses the complexities and interaction of race, gender and disability. However, I think men – in general – have an easier time in *most* workplaces than women, and that men with disabilities also benefit from “male privilege.” I think that women with disabilities are further alienated than women without disabilities because society (and men in particular) view them as not being able to fill some of the critical “female roles” – being sexy, being sexual, being nurturing, being a wife/mother. Women with disabilities have to deal with both sexism and ableism, and often do not have the support of able-bodied women in the workplace.

Ethnicity is a *huge* issue – far more visible than disabilities, but equally visible to gender. Women of colour, particularly black women and First Nations women, face racist attitudes on a daily basis. If their disability is more visible than their racial characteristics, it might be considered an added disadvantage, but clearly the race of a woman is seen before most types of disability. Women of colour are particularly marginalized by stereotypes and expectations as well as language barriers and cultural conflicts. Disabilities – particularly mental health disabilities, communication disabilities, and mental disabilities – make women of colour even less desirable, in employers’ minds, to hire and retain in the workplace, because of the perception of “multiple problems.”

**HELEN WAGLE:** All marginalized and under-represented groups in the workplace share common issues and barriers. Access, equity, and accommodation are key terms used by many advocates working to remove barriers in the workplace. These words do not, however, have universally accepted definitions. For example, an able-bodied woman may see her accommodation needs in terms of accessible child care, that is, child care that is affordable and readily available. On the other hand, a woman with a disability may see her accommodation needs in terms of human and technical support or indeed in terms of accessible child care, that is, child care that she can physically get to. In contrast, an able-bodied executive might see his or her workplace accommodation needs in terms of having access to a laptop, cellular phone and modem.

As people look to the issues and barriers that affect women with disabilities in the workplace, one thing must always

be kept in mind: Disability is not a standardizing factor. Disability can affect anyone at any age and from any ethnic or racial background. Women with disabilities should therefore be recognized as facing a multitude of barriers in the workplace including sexism, racism and homophobia.

**MEENU SIKAND-TAYLOR:** In this economic phase we are going through, I think the morale for *all* employees has been down because there’s no job security and companies are going through major financial reform. I think a woman with a disability has double, triple the disadvantage compared to a regular employee. But although the issues are different, the consequences are the same. It’s your livelihood. Your financial independence could be in jeopardy.

### **How can someone who is both a woman and a person with a disability successfully confront attitudinal barriers which she is certain to face?**

**HELEN WAGLE:** Be confident about your abilities. Attitudinal barriers generally result from a lack of understanding about what a woman with a disability can and cannot do. Attitudinal barriers are based on assumptions, not facts. It is important always to challenge these assumptions because they prevent women with disabilities from fully participating in the workplace.

When confronted by an attitudinal barrier, try to explain clearly why a particular attitude is harmful or discriminatory. Focus on the problem, not the individual. Encourage the individual who has created the barrier to think about how they would like to be treated if they were a person with a disability. This role reversal technique can be a very effective way to educate someone who has not thought about how their behaviour can affect those around them negatively. Remember to document the exchange for evaluation purposes and to ensure that you do not receive retribution for raising the issue.

In addition, lobby your employer for a policy on dealing with attitudinal barriers in the workplace. The development of this kind of policy will ensure that your issue will not be misinterpreted as part of a power dynamic or personality conflict.

**SUSAN FORSTER:** Try to assess what kind of support you may have in the workplace before you start a new job.

If your supervisor or boss is supportive of you, situations of discrimination may be prevented or at least occur less often. If that isn’t the case, you may decide to watch and listen to see who might be reasonably open to accepting you as a woman with a disability. Cultivate those co-workers as allies. It is very hard not to feel that you are very much alone in the workplace otherwise. If there are any other people in the workplace with disabilities, try to get to know them as well. If you are the only person or woman with a disability in the workplace, then ensure that you have some outside support from friends, a spouse or family. These kinds of supports will provide you with the needed strength when you do encounter discrimination and barriers in the workplace.

**TANIS DOE:** Be yourself – the worst advice is to try to be someone you’re not. Do not try to meet or beat the stereotypes. Be who you are, especially if that person happens to be creative, assertive and willful, but also if you are introverted, emotional or intellectual, be you. Contact with *real* people is the leading method of eliminating attitudinal barriers. You are not a representative of other people with disabilities. You are a worker and you have a job to do. Many women feel that they must put up with difficult situations because failure would make women with disabilities “look bad.” Women without disabilities make mistakes, ask for help, and succeed too. So should women with disabilities.

**KIM MILLER:** The most effective means of dealing with attitudinal barriers is to try to maintain a positive sense of your Self when you find yourself confronted by another person’s ignorance. Rather than seeing the incident as a personal attack, use it as an opportunity to educate the other person in a direct manner. Try not to be defensive or self-righteous. Do not let the incident go by without responding either immediately or in the near future. You may never be able to change the other person’s attitude; however, you can at least make the attempt to educate them. You will probably feel better about yourself.

**MARIE WHITE:** One thing a person should certainly not do is try to prove that she can work as well or as hard as anyone else in her workplace. I do not need to prove anything to anyone! I work hard and consider myself equal to my peers in all aspects of my work ability.

**FRANCINE ARSENAULT:** Don’t take offense when you confront an attitudinal

barrier. Just state what it is, work with others around you to remove it, and get on with the job you were hired to do.

**SHEILA SERUP:** I always try to be graceful, open, forthright and honest when confronting an attitudinal barrier. I try to explain and discuss these issues in a non-threatening manner. It is important to be patient, consistent and fair. A sense of humour also helps to get the message across.

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## How can someone build a rapport with her employer that will be both supportive and accommodating?

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**RAFIA HANIFF:** You can build a rapport by talking to the employer, having open communication with the employer, answering questions and educating them on your needs, because a lot of times, employers' fear of the unknown is a barrier to being supportive and accommodating.

One technique is to use your manager or someone within your organization as a role model and mentor – and as women with disabilities we should be open to the mentor being a male, because I had a male as a mentor and it really did open the circle for me. He would take me to meetings and if it were not for him, I would not have been at those meetings and met a different level of management. His colleagues in turn knew me, and sometimes I would be presenting at those meetings on his behalf, and he would be there supporting me. In a way he exposed my skills to senior level staff, and I think that's a very good way of progressing within the organization.

When I say male versus female, you go with who you're comfortable with, but one of the things that women are facing within the organizations is that women are not in abundance at the top level. So there are some limitations in terms of having a senior woman as a mentor.

**BETTY DAVIDSON:** Ask to be treated like any other employee, with or without disabilities. Do not demand special treatment, but at the same time make sure human rights are met.

**MEENU SIKAND-TAYLOR:** First of all, know your job. Know your duties and obligations, and make sure you communicate about it. Make sure you understand from your employer the mission and mandate of the company. Set up a constant passage of feedback. Keep the dialogue going between you and your

employer. Learn to distinguish between your wants and your needs, and be able to negotiate them effectively. And also be open-minded if for some reason your want has to wait because of the company's needs.

**NORMA LORINCZ:** Building both a supportive and accommodating rapport is possible but it requires honest communication and a willingness to look at the possibilities to ensure a win-win situation.

**HELEN WAGLE:** This question implies that the onus should be on the employee. I believe that employers have an obligation to create a workplace that is supportive (free from harassment) and accommodating to all of its employees. However, I do acknowledge that not all employers are knowledgeable about the various forms of accommodation. Ensuring that your employer has a solid understanding of your accommodation needs will contribute to development of a supportive and accommodating relationship. Always inform your employer of any changes in your condition that may affect your ability to do your job.

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## How can the same support be achieved from co-workers?

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**NORMA LORINCZ:** Achieving support from your co-workers is very similar to achieving it from your employer. It starts with communication. Find out if there are any preconceived expectations or unwritten rules that everyone follows. Be willing to ask for help when you need it. Many co-workers would be more than willing to give a hand, but they need you to tell them what it is they can do for you. Remember when asking for help that they too have a job to do, so allow them some flexibility and time to assist you. To ensure honest communication and a win-win situation, you must be willing to hear that they are not able to help you and not take it personally (this is assuming that there are no attitudinal barriers).

**HELEN WAGLE:** Do not allow yourself to be treated differently from any other employee unless it's an accommodation. Encourage your employer to provide sensitivity training to all the employees on attitudinal barriers, workplace discrimination and harassment.

**FRANCINE ARSENAULT:** Co-workers need to be assured they won't be taxed to

assist you, but may out of common courtesy support you and your extra needs until you adjust to the job, and then you'll be okay on your own.

**MEENU SIKAND-TAYLOR:** These days, companies are very team-oriented, so make sure you learn to be an effective team player. Talk to your peers. I learned about baseball because I work with guys! Keep learning from every situation. As a woman, I was never told by anyone that I had to be knowledgeable about finances and investments. You might be surprised what you end up learning!

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## What warning signs could alert an employer to attitudinal barriers and issues of vulnerability in the workplace?

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**TANIS DOE:** Ask the person with the disability if they are feeling comfortable, welcomed, etc. Ask the co-workers. Why wait for fire alarms to go off? *Ask!* Desegregation in the states, co-ed schools, etc., all brought visible and verbal disagreement. Ask what people feel/think.

**IRENE FEIKA:** Direct comments. For example, one of my colleagues on the management team said people should have to have a complete medical before being hired, thereby eliminating anyone who might cost the company extra money. My prescription medication costs are approximately \$550 a month. Fortunately, the suggestion was seen as discriminatory and was not put into practice.

**SPIRIT SYNOTT:** Trust your gut. Ask. Act.

**TRACI WALTERS:** Isolation of the worker with a disability. If everyone goes for lunch together and the person with a disability is left behind, maybe it is because the restaurants they are going to are inaccessible, therefore causing isolation.

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## Have you personally known of a woman with a disability who has faced sexual harassment in the workplace?

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Of 11 women who responded to this question, eight of them – almost three-quarters – disclosed that they personally knew of a woman with a disability who had been sexually harassed in the workplace. This alarming figure reflects a

great vulnerability to sexual harassment among women with disabilities.

## Are women with disabilities at greater risk for sexual harassment in the workplace?

Nine of the 10 women who answered this question said that they do indeed believe the risk is greater for women with disabilities.

**HELEN WAGLE:** Definitely. The experience-based reality of women with disabilities is that they have the highest rate of sexual abuse of any group of women. Women with disabilities often hold short-term, contract positions and do not have the security of a permanent job. Given their already vulnerable position in the workplace, women with disabilities are often hesitant about filing complaints or disclosing instances of sexual harassment. In addition, the support available in dealing with workplace sexual harassment is very limited. Women's groups and labour unions are only now beginning to address the hyper-vulnerability to sexual harassment that these workers face.

**RAFIA HANIFF:** Definitely – in the workplace and out of the workplace. Statistics have shown that women with disabilities are four times as often being sexually harassed or sexually assaulted compared to other women in general. It's a myth to think that women with disabilities are not harassed in the workplace.

**FRANCINE ARSENAULT:** Yes. Women with disabilities are more liable to sexual harassment because there are myths that they are either asexual, or sex-starved.

**SPIRIT SYNOTT:** The reality is yes. Take a wen-do course in self-defense. I highly recommend it to all women, in or out of the workplace. Remember, no one asks to be harassed. DAWN (DisAbled Women's Network) will also be able to provide resources and support systems in this area.

**TANIS DOE:** Yes. All women are at risk, but women with disabilities are often even more afraid to bring up the issue because it seems so hard to find a job and there are risks to disclosing this kind of harassment. They can also be seen as vulnerable by offenders who use the harassment as a power tool. Statistics are showing that people in positions of trust – parents, caregivers, teachers and medical professionals – are abusing women and children with disabilities. Not enough

research has been done in the workplace to look at issues of abuse, but it is clearly possible that the same dynamic is present where an imbalance of power leads to an abuse of trust.

## What should someone do if she feels she is being sexually harassed at work?

**SUSAN FORSTER:** There are several things you can do. Find out whether the organization/company has a human rights policy. There may be someone whom you can consult confidentially about your experiences and who can give advice on what steps you can take (such as procedures for filing a complaint). If you believe that your supervisor will be supportive, confide in him or her. In Ontario, employers have an obligation to provide discrimination and a harassment-free workplace under the *Human Rights Code*. Confide in a trusted colleague, who may also be able to make some suggestions to you.

If there is no official policy in place in your workplace addressing sexual harassment, then contact the nearest Human Rights Commission office for further information.

If you are feeling a great deal of stress and emotional pain as a result of an instance of sexual harassment, seek out support with counselling. You could ask for a referral from your family doctor, from close friends, or contact an Independent Living Centre if there is one located in your city. A peer advocate who works for an ILC may be able to provide you with support or refer you to a professional counsellor who is sensitive to the needs of women with disabilities.

**BETTY DAVIDSON:** First try to deal with it by letting the individual know that it is not appreciated and that you will not put up with it. If this does not work, then it must be reported, in writing, to the board of directors, executive, or the individual in authority. Then, if nothing is resolved, file a human rights complaint against that individual.

**MEENU SIKAND-TAYLOR:** Be prepared to share the information in a rational, assertive manner. Keep the facts in a journal with all the dates and anything you think is important. Don't blame yourself. If it is someone else's problem, they have to deal with it.

**RAFIA HANIFF:** Seek out support services that are available, because sometimes when someone speaks out, they do not

necessarily get the support within the organization. So seek support services within the organization *and* outside of the organization. Within the organization there would be the employment equity and human rights staff who would be supportive in a situation like this. If the organization does not resolve this to your liking, you can also file a complaint under the *Ontario Human Rights Code*.

Getting support is something I want to stress. It is extremely important. I have known someone who has been in that situation and it has turned her whole life upside down.

## Do you have any final advice for a woman with a disability in the work force?

**MEENU SIKAND-TAYLOR:** Make sure you do everything in your power to achieve your full potential. That could be educating yourself, upgrading your technical skills, overcoming your cultural barriers, and getting involved in all aspects of your company's operations. Know the missions and mandate of your company and find ways you can help the company achieve them by taking initiative and finding alternative solutions. Also, if you come across any stigmas or taboos attached to certain ethnic or cultural groups, make sure that you bring those to the attention of the administration and raise awareness of cultural sensitivities. Go a little out of your way to initiate a new process or model which facilitates and encourages the full participation of people with disabilities in all aspects of the company's operations.

**HELEN WAGLE:** I do have a lot of concern about the large numbers of women with disabilities who cannot secure meaningful employment. Despite the concerted efforts of many advocacy groups, many barriers to women's equality in the work force remain.

Inequitable access to available job opportunities is a reality for many women with disabilities. Inaccessible work sites, the lack of adequate accessible transportation, and biased attitudes on the part of employers and co-workers about what women with disabilities are capable of doing create an environment where women with disabilities do not have equal opportunity in the work force. Moreover, training and employment barriers have caused women with disabilities in the labour force to be concentrated in a narrow range of occupations, which contributes to their lower earnings.

**SHEILA SERUP:** Being a member of the work force can be immensely rewarding despite its daily challenges. It can be stimulating and a time of great learning. Work, like life, is all about what you make of your situation. If you're positive, upbeat, work hard, find satisfaction in small things, then work can be fulfilling. It's important to maintain your perspective on your work situation and make sure that your job is what you really want. Do not become limited by other people's expectations of what you can do. Believe that you can do anything you want. And go for it.

**FRANCINE ARSENAULT:** You are a valued, unique human being with some special contributions only you can make. Do the best you can each day and be at peace with yourself.

**BETTY DAVIDSON:** Have a sense of humour, treat others as you would like to be treated, be open on your limitations and needs.

**SPIRIT SYNOTT:** Set obtainable goals first. When you've built up your confidence, push yourself past your comfort zone. You might surprise yourself. If you don't take risks, you're not allowing yourself to grow.

Keeping active and taking breaks to relax helps me to deal with stress. Believe me, no matter what profession you choose, stress is a built-in fact of life. I try to do what I enjoy and enjoy what I do. Doing a job that makes you happy gives you a sense of purpose and reduces stress.

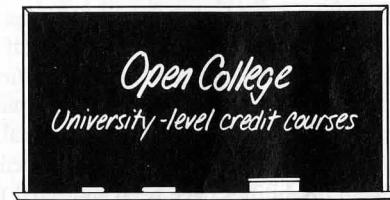
**IRENE FEIKA:** Know your job and do it well. Upgrade if the company offers it. Show your *ability!* Your disability is a part of you but should not outshine your qualifications and skills.

**TRACI WALTERS:** If you believe in yourself and your abilities, other people will too.

**NORMA LORINZ:** Always have a vision or a dream. Never stop learning. Enjoy where you're at right now, and pursue those dreams of where you'd like to go. Be open to possibilities. Risk a lot. Laugh and be happy. Enjoy the journey – it is yours!



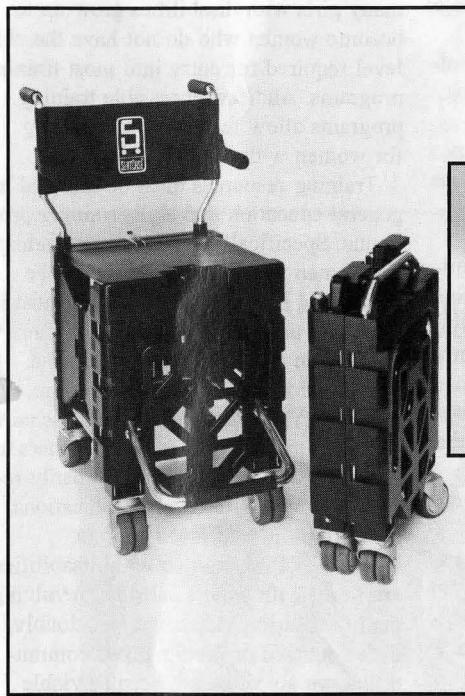
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